

Solidarity

Journal of the UCU mental health campaign group
University of Nottingham



Issue 1

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Editorial

Nick Stevenson

Welcome to the first issue of Solidarity!

The on-line magazine you are now reading has grown out of the conversations that have taken place in the Nottingham UCU Mental Health Campaign Group.

In the early days we were all struck that there was something wrong with our working environment but found it hard to be sure what. The more the group began to talk a number of themes began to emerge that are reflected in many of the short contributions contained here. Overwhelmingly there was a sense in the group that what is often called 'mental health' in our culture is often treated as if it was a purely personal set of problems. This did not seem right. What most of the contributions contained here are seeking to do is to link the personal with the social. If indeed you are struggling with 'mental health' problems it may indeed be as rooted in the culture within which we live as within the self.



If the current neoliberal climate seeks to make each of us responsible only for ourselves there is a strong suggestion that this has a cruel edge.

Within the group many talked about a relentless culture of performance goals, unrealistic expectations, precarity and over work all of which leads to more personal feelings of inadequacy and distress. Only through collective action can we expect to address these questions.

As I put the first issue together (with the help of Pat Brundell who did such an excellent job on the design of these pages) I thought of the work of David Smail. David was a critical thinker and a former Special Professor in Clinical Psychology at Nottingham University. His work is a testament to the view that personal distress is not a purely personal matter but the systematic creation of a cruel market driven culture. Smail (1993:216) comments 'our vulnerability to pain and recognition of it in others is what binds us together across unbridgeable divides.' Solidarity indeed.

Nick Stevenson: Convenor of the Nottingham UCU Group on Mental Health.

Smail, D. (1993) *The Origins of Personal Distress*, London, Constable.



Running

Lisa Rüll

When the going gets tough, I run away.

Some of this running is positive: actual feet in running shoes, on roads, trails, hills, fields. Up to 13 miles at a time. Away across the countryside, the canals, the locality.

I love running. Working from home means no commute, so I can now get up at 6:30 and run, shower, eat breakfast and still be at my computer to start the day promptly. I can run after work, an incentive to switch off promptly. No need to carry laptops or changes of clothes to and from work (nowhere to store anything in the office anyway). I run for fitness and mental health.

But some of my running is less positive.

The running in circles, ending up where you started, just now further behind because time has passed.

I know this cycle.

It's my "I have to do this because the consequences later down the line - for me, for colleagues, for students - will be more complex, when we least have capacity, if something isn't done now, even though I have no capacity right now". It's the "everything is a priority" mode.

I look, and suddenly, not so suddenly, I can't see how I got here. I can't see a way out. I suddenly look to find I'm on a moving hamster wheel and someone else is frenetically turning a handle making it go ever faster.

Physically exhausted, emotionally overloaded. Once I'm in busy mode, I can't stop taking responsibility, adding responsibilities even though I am straining; adding work tasks, striving to show "continual improvement" (a common university mantra). Must show that I am enough, must counter criticism (in my past, in my head, in the pit of my stomach). Responsibility for everything, but it never feels like I am doing enough.

I NEED TO DO THIS

But I can't, so I feel guilty, so I try to prove more. I run, ever busy, failing more, failing harder, feeling every minor comment as a wound of my inadequacy.

The University creates this, exacerbates any underlying tendency, through its behaviour. I am sick of resilience training, lunchtime wellbeing sessions, putting the onus on the individual to do the right thing instead of addressing institutional practices.



Running

Lisa Rüll

I run because I love it, but the level at which I need it directly correlates to the impossible workloads, staffing issues, and inadequate systems that have been the bane of UoN life for too many years. Hard-working staff can't make silk purses from the ongoing sows' ears that Project Transform forced onto us. I look at the number of colleagues who have run and keep taking the opportunity to run away from UoN - sometimes to other jobs, but also to no job, because staying is no longer viable.

We're running on empty.

Our mental health deserves changes to working practices, and not just another self-referral option.

Dr Lisa Rüll, Disability Support Services





What becomes of the broken hearted?

Aimie Purser

My friend says academia has broken her heart. It happened slowly, across years and years of rejection, broken promises and being kept in a state of precarity. She's not alone in experiencing her dream career as a process of being chewed up and (constantly under threat of being) spat out. We live in neoliberal times, after all, and these feelings will perhaps resonate particularly with many struggling to make it in the uneven terrain of the creative arts. For all of us, amongst those not invited in from the cold, no matter how much of yourself you give, how much of your soul you bare, what's in there is never quite good enough to secure you a living wage, a right to exist founded on what you have to offer the world.

Of course by the time we reach the academic job market we have already been lucky enough to benefit from years (decades) of education, the likes of which many people in the world can only dream of. But that does not mean that there is no value in making visible the cycles of toxicity that serve to perpetuate and normalise academia's treatment of the precarious workforce who contribute so significantly to the running and finances of HEIs and yet are so painfully and irreparably broken in the process.

Much of the toxicity in the relationship between academia and the academic ingenue revolves around the establishment of dependency. Precarious workers in higher education are typically paid poorly and sporadically leaving them to experience their income as reliant on the beneficence of the HEI (or particular individuals within it who may extend or cancel a contract at will). But beyond that, academic training can make us feel we are fit for little else. We cannot imagine we could be capable of, never mind happier in, another career. Moreover the unusual and intense demands of the PhD process and academic year can isolate us from friends and family who don't understand what we do, and many of us feel increasingly alienated from rather than reassured by friends and family asking why we don't just look for a different type of job. I (and my PhD) only have meaning inside the system. And inside that intensely demanding relationship, we are constantly told that however much we give of ourselves - remember that academics do some of the most unpaid overtime of all jobs and that we are constantly opening ourselves to often deeply personal scrutiny from a range of anonymous and thus irrefutable sources - we are not enough. Children can be cruel, reviewers even more so, and imposter syndrome perhaps the cruellest of all.



What becomes of the broken hearted?

Anon.

How could you consider you might be appreciated elsewhere when academia, the one place that truly understands all you have to offer, finds you lacking?

Once inside the reality and logic of a toxic relationship it is difficult to see a way out, or indeed to even see an exit from the relationship as desirable. It is difficult to see that we do not simply deserve our fate (is it not my fault that I am never enough?). Difficult to question the message that we are lucky to be tolerated and the fear that that tolerance may soon be exhausted leaving us exiled forever.

There are an increasing number of accounts on the internet from those who inhabit a far happier personal and professional life post-academia. But what of those who stay? The question of mental health in academia is a question of conditions but also a question of legacy. The permanent workforce of academia are carrying the wounds inflicted through this systemic mistreatment, and, in staying in the relationship, they find themselves with little chance for healing or personal growth.

In tackling this there is a place for individual acts of compassion and care directed towards both self and others. In making academia a kinder place we support healing and can find collective ways to protect ourselves more robustly from the dynamics of toxicity. But while self- (and other-) care can be a defence, it is not a solution. Rather what is needed is a collective refusal to see us broken at the hands of neoliberal academia and a re-articulation of the grounds on which we enter and inhabit this relationship.

This means fighting casualisation and rejecting an audit, performance and money-driven culture which stifles diversity, individuality and creativity. It also may mean giving up some of the more cultish aspects of academia - relinquishing some of its 'specialness' - including those which many of us find reassuring and which may have attracted us to academia in the first place. It is only if we can open up this closed system, that the broken hearted will manage to successfully re-negotiate the power and dependency relationships that have dominated their lives and sense of self for so long and to such damaging effect.



Toxic Positivity in the University Sector

Colin Wright

Last year, as Director of the Centre for Critical Theory at The University of Nottingham and alongside some of our excellent PhD students, I organised a series of three talks under the title 'Toxic Positivity'. The speakers - Dr Jana Bacevic (Cambridge), Dr Jamie Woodcock (OU) and Dr Liz Moorish (now an independent scholar) - gave presentations that engaged with the mental health impacts of the neoliberalisation of the university. The series then culminated with a one-day summit bringing together anti-casualisation activists opposed to the increasingly exploitative nature of academic work, including its 'toxic' effects on wellbeing.

These events took place before the Covid-19 pandemic brutally exposed the university sector's scandalous reliance on precisely such precarious labour. Since these issues have only become more pressing, I thought I would take this opportunity to briefly unpack what this notion of 'toxic positivity' highlights.

The 'positivity' part acknowledges the discourse of health and wellbeing which has become extremely 'loud' in the academic workplace: we are now enjoined to work on our work-life balance, do yoga over lunch breaks, pilates at our desks, meditate, and attend workshops on mindfulness.

The wellbeing of our students is similarly framed, but primarily as our fee-paying customers whose negative feedback would harm the brand. One could see these as responses to the so-called 'epidemic' of mental health problems on university campuses, or one could also see them as part of the problem. The 'toxic' part of 'toxic positivity' therefore emphasises that it is often these corporate wellbeing measures that add to, rather than ameliorate, our stress, anxiety and exhaustion. This kind of positivity is toxic because it prevents much-needed critique by effectively banning negativity. It puts all the emphasis on the responsibility of the individual rather than on the broader systemic context. It is toxic for our mental health because it encourages us to castigate ourselves for failing to achieve the requisite workplace 'resilience'. It even re-frames the very concept of 'health' in such a way as to render it indistinguishable from productivity (I write also as a psychoanalyst, who sees further evidence of this toxicity in his consulting room).

We should keep this problem of toxic positivity in mind as we find ways - and we surely must - to create better, more collegiate, enriching and mutually supportive mental health ecologies within academia.



To be a shop assistant or a tutor?

Anon.

I began working at the university as a part time teacher [on zero hour contracts] over a decade ago and was not allowed to use 'Teaching Associate' as a signature on email to students as this did not signify what was said on my pay slip 'casual worker'. Over time it was concluded we could use 'Tutor'. I attempted several times in securing permanent work, yet was unsuccessful and this led to live in a constant state of anxiety, unpredictability and questioning was academia really worth it? Apart from telling people at dinner parties that you worked at a university, which sounded impressive it was not reflective in the salary or job satisfaction. The long hours, the late-night marking and responding to many emails from frantic students' days before the deadline and your commitment to see students succeed was not recognised. If I were thinking of doing REF status research alongside teaching I would find it a near impossible task!

With all this in mind, this runs parallel to having two chronic health conditions, being immunocompromised and my husband having a long-term illness. To say that the lack of career progression, job insecurity and continuous pressure would be an understatement! The impact on my mental and emotional health has been immense.

Not only are you struggling with the thoughts of 'imposter syndrome' as a working class woman from a Muslim background, you are also having to prove your worth and work doubly as hard by showing you are 'fine' and not letting your health bring you down, only to show colleagues you have let the team down again! If I am poorly, I know then I would not get paid and my hours are reallocated to someone else. Thus, in order to get paid I would need to ensure I can physically bring myself into department that day to teach and prove my worth and not to be an inconvenience to others in the department.

When my husband became severely unwell, he was supported by his employees through sick pay, health cover and flexibility in terms of working from home. It meant he could focus on his health without having to worry if he would be able to pay the bills. My husband would often remark jokingly that I worked intensely and yet, still I had less job security than him!

Now the new semester dawns upon us all, I have to consider leaving this job, as I attend UCU meetings I feel empowered and inspired by the work they continue to do, yet this shouldn't be the case. Our university institutions are supposed to be beacons of equality and justice, yet we fail to live by the principles we teach to the next generation.

To be a shop assistant or a tutor? (cont.)

I constantly have battled with and questioned if academia is for me, the lack of job progression and continuous barriers, [facing islamophobia] have been off putting and impacted my emotional and physical wellbeing. I often seriously consider working as a shop assistant in supermarkets would entitle me to better status, rights and financial stability than working in a university where one's commitment, loyalty, dedication, and hard work remains unrecognised. Without the support of 'white allies' calling out injustices within academia I think I would have handed in the towel a long time ago.



The University as an anxiety machine

Richard Hall

Under austerity and amplified by the pandemic, overwork and ill-health are increasingly reported as deeply intertwined amongst professional services staff, academics and students. There are an increasing number of both innovation and university citizenship activities that fold on top of business-as-usual for these University workers, and that form an exhausting, non-exhaustive list. For staff, a proliferation of technological processes alongside a raft of institutional and national bureaucracy have amplified the administrative pressures that exacerbate workload inequalities.

Decision-making and control over the tempo and loading of work is increasingly being managed bureaucratically rather than collegially, and based upon an understanding of University work framed by economic value and surplus. In this framing the University takes forms that catalyse cultures as pathologies and activities as methodologies, and which describe it as an anxiety machine. Inside the anxiety machine, University workers are subject to exploitative and normalised anxiety-driven overwork as a culturally-acceptable self-harming activity. Thus, refusing a discussion of mental ill-health as being pathologically-inherent in the weak, and widening the examination of the role that anxiety plays in the re-engineering of the University as a business, is crucial.



The University as an anxiety machine

Richard Hall

Inside pathological and diseased cultures of overwork and over-performance, of self-exploitation and subordination, anxiety about position and judgement (made externally and reinforced through internalisation of performance management) becomes a motive force. Anxiety is inherent in the design of a system driven by improving productivity and the potential for the accumulation of capital. This is witnessed in the public performance of workaholic professors, whose practice recalibrates the performance of those around them, forcing others to self-harm in ways that are culturally-acceptable inside the University.

University workers are locked into a system that leaves them all played out, resting on cultures of omertà (the silence of those in the know), which enables staff and student mental health to be ruptured over-and-over. Moreover, this also leads to the denial of systemic, intersectional manifestations of mental ill-health, for instance in racial battle fatigue, reinforced by an invisible workload of emotional/affective labour.

Clearly, there are layers to these forms of emotional and psychological distress, rooted in issues of alienation, and which include what staff and students internalise and what activities and beliefs are legitimised. What is to be done? We need to find ways to share and validate experiences, and then to demonstrate the systemic nature of our anxiety and its impact upon us. Through solidarity actions, we need to shame those who seek to impose culturally-acceptable, self-harming activities, and in the process we need to move from anxiety through hopelessness to anger as a form of resistance. This work needs us to occupy new spaces such that we can build coalitions inside and outside the University. We must own our collective mental health rather than reproducing the systemic desires that hurt us.





Disobedience

Nick Stevenson

I was recently re-watching Sebastian Lelio's film *Disobedience*. On release in 2017 it seemed to pass under the radar despite getting a few good reviews. I was surprised it did not strike more of a chord. In the film Ronit (played by Rachel Weisz) returns home to the Orthodox Jewish community of her birth. Her presence is widely recognised as disruptive and much of the drama of the film flows from the ripple effects of her unwelcome presence. I was still thinking about this film when I was talking to a friend about his summer. It had been difficult as the children had been bored, argumentative and mostly refusing to do what they were told. I, of course, offered my sympathies as I have children of my own and know how difficult it can be when you want a rest and they mostly have other ideas. A few days later, I discovered the new book by philosopher Frederic Gros called 'Disobey' in the Five Leaves bookshop in Nottingham. Feeling a theme developing, I thought I had better read it. The author's main point is that while many liberal philosophers think we are free through our ability to make choices, this is somewhat superficial in a social order that insists on obedience. Why do most people obey most of the time and do so without questioning?

Under what circumstances do we have a duty to resist orders from above?

Not surprisingly, the answer to this is complex, but Gros insists that whilst disobedience, is widely pathologised, obedience is often more problematic. If we consider the evidence of 'group think' displayed by the government during this summer's education crisis, Gros clearly has a point. Of course, disobedience can only be considered ethical if it is done with a considerable amount of responsibility and critical reflection.

This has more to do with recent discussions of 'mental health' than it might at first appear. Society generally sees poor mental health as basically a personal affliction that can be recovered from through a combination of positivity, therapy and pills. While I am not seeking to doubt that this is sometimes the case, there is however something shallow about these assumptions. What is being refused here is the possibility of something valuable lurking within our more troubled feelings. What if within our personal troubles there is a protest against what we are being asked to do, or the role we are being asked to perform? We should at least admit this is a possibility.



Disobedience

Nick Stevenson

The usual charge here is that we all need to adapt to survive and that the development of personal resilience will help us tackle our problems. The problem with this view is the assumption that adaptation is the best strategy. Missing is the idea that it is wrong simply to adapt to what is required of us by an institution if it cannot be considered to be ethical.

In the 1960s, the psychotherapist Erich Fromm wrote extensively about the idea that the attempt to adapt to a sick society would indeed make us sick. Fromm produced a short essay on this subject called 'Disobedience as a Psychological and Moral Problem'. It is not surprising, he argues, that so much stress is placed on the virtue of obedience in a society that has long been governed by a set of hierarchical rules issued historically by the church, landowners and capitalists. However, unlike Gros, Fromm approaches this as not just a moral problem, but a psychological one too. The key point Fromm wants to make is that it is only out of acts of disobedience that society has changed. Simply following the rules has never made the world a more just or humane place.

Historically, those in authority have often sought to silence new ideas or ostracise those who have struggled for a better world. This does not of course mean that all acts of disobedience are always to be celebrated, but if people can only obey, Fromm reasons, we should consider them slaves. Freedom, Fromm is suggesting, is as much a psychological problem as it is one of being controlled from above by the powerful. That the power to say 'no' is the essential attribute of any decent moral human-being. Fromm at this point speculates that people conform to the rule of hierarchy not simply out of fear, but because there is often a pay-off in terms of feeling stronger. Further, that conformity takes away the vexed uncertainty of doubt and having to think for yourself. Fromm wrote these words as a German Jewish intellectual who had survived the assault on democratic ideals by totalitarianism in the 1930s. In post-war American corporate society, Fromm feared that many had lost the capacity for principled disobedience. The rise of 'the organisation' meant many lacked the ability to think critically or indeed act humanely.



Disobedience

Nick Stevenson

If indeed Fromm is right, where does this lead current discussions on 'mental health'? It certainly opens up a set of radical questions beyond simply removing stigma or asking for adequate resources. The path to success may not always be the same as the route to becoming an ethical human-being. Being a 'troublesome' person (not just for the sake of it) may not be what hierarchical institutions want, but unless we are to reduce ourselves to being automatons then this may be the path we have to take—being a people pleasing adaptive person is a problem from an ethical and psychological point of view. This is not the recipe for an easy life so beloved by those who tell us to think positively. Instead a healthy amount of disobedience should be celebrated by any society that wishes to call itself democratic in any meaningful sense. Instead of valuing productivity and the numbers on a balance sheet perhaps the university would be better served in talking to students and the wider community about the on-going necessity of being critical of power in an increasingly troubled world. This will of course mean interrupting the idea that the purpose of going to university is simply to get a good job, but more that we need ethically driven and disruptive people more than ever before.

That living a good life not only requires a considerable amount of effort poorly understood by mainstream consumerist ideas and that to do so may indeed disrupt your 'peace of mind'.



If you would like to contribute to the next issue of Solidarity then please contact me at the e mail address below. Also if you would like to join the 'mental health' campaign group or find out more of the work that we do then please do get in touch

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